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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated two social skills interventions designed to increase the peer acceptance of six students (ages 10-12) with learning disabilities in regular classrooms. The students were instructed in two social skills strategies as well as in skills for working in small groups and leading group activities. Two mnemonic devices were used to facilitate the skills training, the FAST Strategy and the SLAM Strategy. The FAST Strategy (Freeze and Think, Alternatives, Solution, Try It) aids in interpersonal problem solving. The SLAM Strategy (Stop whatever you're doing, Look the person in the eye, Ask the person a question if you do not understand exactly what s/he means, Make an appropriate response to the person) enables students to accept and assimilate negative feedback and remarks by others. The SLAM strategy was practiced by the target students and presented to the class in the form of a rap song. Compared to a similar control classroom, results suggest modest intervention effects, with some increases in peer ratings of acceptance of the targeted students by their regular education peers. (15 references) (JDD)

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Increasing Positive Interpersonal Interactions: A Social Intervention for Students with Learning Disabilities in the Regular Classroom

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Abstract

The intervention described below is one of a series of social skills interventions designed to increase the peer acceptance of students with learning disabilities. The intervention incorporated components identified as effective in other intervention research designed to increase peer acceptance. In addition to measures traditionally used to access intervention efficacy, a qualitative component was also added to assess intervention effectiveness. The goal of this intervention was the elevation of peer acceptance of targeted students with learning disabilities by their regular education classmates. Two strategies were taught during the intervention. One strategy taught students an interpersonal problem solving method, the other stratgey taught students how to better accept negative feedback. A comparative control group of targeted students with learning disabilities was assessed to better determine intervention efficacy. Two classrooms were selected, one to act as the experimental classroom to take part in the intervention, the other classroom to act as a test-only control. These two classrooms were selected for their similar composition of students and mainstreaming practice. Both classrooms contained mainstreamed students with learning disabilities who were determined to be low accepted by their regular education classmates. Results suggest modest intervention effects, with increases in peer ratings of acceptance by the targeted experimental subjects by their regular education peers. Other positive outcomes of the intervention included comments by the experimental classroom teacher and students. Discussion focuses on far and near measures used to assess intervention effects and directions for future research.

It has long been accepted that students who are learning disabled are at risk for low peer acceptance and deficits in socially appropriate behavior (e.g., Bryan, 1974) as well as poor academic performance. In fact social skills deficits are viewed as one of the disorders associated with learning disabilities (Kavanagh & Truss, 1988). In the past decade, several interventions have been carried out to examine best practices in social intervention research with students identified as having learning disabilities (for a review, see McIntosh, Vaughn, & Zaragoza, in press). In that review, McIntosh et al. attempted to identify characteristics or components of effective social skills training programs for students with learning disabilities. These characteristics included selecting subjects who have social skills difficulties in addition to being learning disabled, use of a model that includes cognitive-behavioral procedures, individual or small group instruction, and long term intervention and training programs.

The intervention described below is one of a series of social skills interventions designed to increase the peer acceptance of students with learning disabilities. The intervention incorporates components that have been identified as effective in other intervention research designed to increase peer acceptance. In addition to measures traditionally used to access intervention efficacy, a qualitative component was also added to the assessment of intervention effectiveness. The goal of this intervention was the elevation of peer acceptance of targeted students with learning disabilities by their regular education classmates. Similar interpersonal problem solving strategy interventions have been implemented successfully in a case study with a low accepted

elementary student with learning disabilities (Vaughn, Lancelotta, & Minnis, 1988) and with a group of ten peer rejected students with learning disabilities from third through fifth grade classrooms in a large elementary school (Vaughn, McIntosh, & Spencer-Rowe, in press). The present study sought to implement a similar intervention to the past studies with the addition of a newly developed strategy to help students better accept negative feedback as well as put in place a comparative control group of targeted students with learning disabilities to better analyze the results of the intervention.

Two classrooms in the same elementary school were selected for this study, one to act as the experimental classroom to take part in the intervention, the other classroom to act as a test-only control. These two classrooms were selected for their similar composition of students and mainstreaming practice. Both classrooms contained mainstreamed students with learning disabilities who were determined to be low accepted by their regular education classmates. For example, one of the low peer accepted students in the experimental classroom was Julio. Julio's academic skills had improved considerably since being placed in the special education resource room for two hours a day. Unfortunately, his social interactions with his peers were still problematic. He had few friends and demonstrated an impulsive problem solving style. In this classroom there were two other students with learning disabilities who also had social difficulties. A classroom based social skills' intervention was designed to increase the peer acceptance of these three target students with learning disabilities.

Method

Subjects

Ages of the six targeted students with learning disabilities, three from each of two classrooms, ranged from 10 years to 12 years, 6 months (mean = 10 years, 9 months). Both classrooms were taught by experienced female teachers who followed the same curriculums and schedules. Students from these classrooms with learning disabilities were mainstreamed for approximately the same amounts of time during the school day, about two hours in the special education resource room and four hours in the regular education classroom. Subjects in both the experimental and control classrooms were identified as low peer accepted by their classmates.

Intervention

The intervention period occurred for thirteen weeks in the spring of the students' school year. Two classrooms containing mainstreamed students with learning disabilities were selected, one classroom for the intervention and one test-only classroom. The intervention has three key components: skills training, informant status, and significant interactions.

In the skills training component, targeted students were instructed in two strategies as well as in skills for working in small groups and leading group activities. The process of learning these skills and strategies included cooperative goal setting, modeling, role play, rehearsal, and practice in natural settings. Two mnemonic devices

were presented to facilitate interpersonal problem solving skills training, the FAST Strategy and the SLAM Strategy.

The FAST Strategy is a four part mnemonic device to aid in interpersonal problem solving. This cognitive behavioral process helps students to develop questioning and monitoring skills, generate a range of solutions, select a long range plan to solve the problem, and implement the plan. Students also are encouraged to monitor and evaluate the selected plan and provide self-feedback. The FAST Strategy is presented in Table 1. Targeted students were encouraged to memorize the FAST strategy. Problem solving using the FAST Strategy was practiced by the targeted students in small groups using problems generated by their classmates. Students also practiced procedures for presenting the FAST Strategy and solutions to the problems to their classmates.

The SLAM Strategy is a four part mnemonic device students can use to accept and assimilate negative feedback and remarks by others. Whereas the FAST Strategy had been used in previous interventions, this strategy was developed by the researchers and adopted by the target students later in the intervention after the FAST Strategy had been mastered and presented to the target students' classmates. This strategy was practiced by the target students, then presented to the class in the form of a rap song to be performed as a reinforcer at the end of large group sessions in the classroom with the target students leading the song. The SLAM Strategy is presented in Table 2. The lyrics to the SLAM Song is presented in Table 3.

Table 1 FAST Strategy to Aid in Solving Interpersonal Problems

FAST Strategy		
F	Freeze and Think	What is the problem? Can I state the problem in behavioral terms?
A	Alternatives	What are all of the possible behaviors that I could do to solve the problem? List all of the possible alternatives.
S	Solution	Which alternatives will solve the problem in the long run? Which are safe and fair? Select the best long run alternative.
T	Try It	How can I implement the solution? Did it work? If this particular solution fails to solve the problem, return to the second step and pick another alternative that might solve the problem.

Table 2 The SLAM Mnemonic Strategy to Aid in Accepting Negative Feedback

SLAM Strategy

(Accepting Negative Feedback)

S	STOP	Stop whatever you're doing.
L	LOOK	Look the person in the eye.
A	ASK	Ask the person a question if you do not understand exactly what s/he means.
M	MAKE	Make an appropriate response to the person.

Table 3 Lyrics to the SLAM Strategy Song

SLAM SONG

Accepting negative feedback, feedback, feedback
Accepting negative feedback, feedback, feedback
Stop what you're doing. Look them in the eye.
Fix your face. We'll tell you why.

Accepting negative feedback, feedback, feedback
Accepting negative feedback, feedback, feedback
Listen with your ear to what they say.
This is no time for you to play.

Accepting negative feedback, feedback, feedback
Accepting negative feedback, feedback, feedback
Ask a question if you don't understand.
Don't stand there in wonderland.

Accepting negative feedback, feedback, feedback
Accepting negative feedback, feedback, feedback
Make a response to their concerns.
Accepting negative feedback is the way to learn.

The second component of the intervention, informant status, permitted the targeted students to assume the role of informants of valuable skills and information. Students with learning disabilities are often the takers rather than givers of information (Brown, Palinscar, & Armbruster, 1984) and have little confidence in the role of informer (Englert, Raphael, Anderson, Anthony, Fear, & Gregg, 1988).

The experimental class during pretesting was told that selected students, chosen through a lottery, would be taught skills and information to enable them to become the class's "social skills trainers". These trainers, after training from university graduate students, would return to the class and teach ways to solve interpersonal problems with others with the guidance of the "social skills trainers". Targeted students were taught the strategies and worked on presentations based on problems generated from a problem solving box placed in the classroom.

At the first meeting of the targeted students, a problem solving box was designed and constructed. The targeted students in the first whole class presentation asked their classmates to place anonymous slips of paper containing interpersonal problems into the box. These slips from the box would enable the trainers to work on interpersonal problems from their classmates when presenting the strategies.

The targeted "social skills" trainers met outside the classroom bi-weekly for the first three weeks of the intervention to learn the strategies, practice skills to lead group activities, and to review problems generated by their class for presentation. For the reminder of the intervention period, targeted students met bi-weekly, once outside the classroom to review and practice, and once each week to present information and skits

designed from selected problems from the problem solving box. Class presentations were directed initially by the graduate student with ever increasing leadership by the social skills trainers.

Recognition of the targeted students was emphasized throughout the intervention period. Congratulatory notes to the trainers were presented. University key chains were given to students acting as social skills trainers. Posters and banners were placed on the classroom walls displaying the strategies and identifying the trainers. Although the initial presentations were directed by the university graduate student, targeted students always were seen as leading the class group and having information valuable to the group. By the end of the intervention period, targeted students were leading the group with the graduate student acting only as observer and time manager.

The third component of the intervention, significant interactions, arranged situations so that targeted students were seen as actively working with significant members of their class and school. One method of arranging significant interactions was through peer pairing. The "lucky" winners of the lottery to become "social skills trainers" were low accepted students with learning disabilities paired with same sex classmates who were popular and high achieving academically. Throughout the intervention, no mention of selection process or pairing was mentioned or questioned by the students or their classmates other than their good fortune to have been selected.

Three pairs of social trainers were selected for intervention. two pairs of male students and one pair of female students. Each pair consisted of one low-accepted student with learning disabilities and one high accepted NLD classmate. Although these

pairs were initially closely matched to work and present together on specific parts of the class presentations, by the end of the interventions the group of six targeted students worked not only in pairs but as a small unified group.

Other methods were incorporated to foster significant interactions. Targeted students worked directly with a university graduate student to learn new skills. Pictures were taken during the class presentations and displayed in the classroom. Various bulletin boards and displays were posted in the classroom displaying the FAST and SLAM Strategies and the names of the social skills trainers. At the end of the intervention period, social skills trainers were presented individual certificates in a ceremony in front of the class, presented by university personnel, proclaiming the targeted students to be "official social skills trainers". An unexpected significant interaction occurred during a school wide talent show competition. The entire class conducted by the targeted students performed the SLAM Strategy rap song. During the end of the intervention ceremony a booklet, authored by the targeted students, was given to each classmate containing the strategies and lyrics to the SLAM Strategy song. Notes were sent home to parents explaining the intervention and its progress which expressed high confidence and skills of the social skills trainers.

Measures

This study selected and designed measures to assess intervention effects on selected targeted students with learning disabilities who were low accepted by their peers.

The Adapted Social Skills Rating Scale for Teachers (SSRST) is a rating scale

assessed by teachers to the extent to which students engage in socially competent behaviors. This instrument was developed by Gresham and Elliott (1986) and later adapted by Vaughn and Hogan (1990) to include only those items relating to social skills. The SSRST was assessed by teachers at pre and post intervention for targeted students with learning disabilities in both the experimental and control classrooms.

A social cognitive interview (Oliva, 1990) was administered individually to targeted students with learning disabilities at both pre and post intervention. Each student was given seven hypothetical situations which had been identified as relating to the establishment of peer relations or situations representing problematic social situations for children. The subject was instructed to imagine him/herself in the situation. Each student was asked three questions relating to strategies and goals after each situation: What would you do?, Why would you do that? and, What else could you do? Responses were categorized using methods by Renshaw and Asher (1983) in which responses were rated from one (unfriendliness or unassertiveness) to five (friendliness or assertiveness).

All students in both classrooms were administered classroom peer ratings and peer nominations at pre and post intervention to measure intervention effects and to identify the targeted students with learning disabilities who were low accepted by their peers as well as high accepted classmates. Three low peer accepted students with learning disabilities and three high accepted classmates from each of the two classrooms, one classroom to receive the intervention and one classroom to act as control.

A group administered peer rating of acceptance (Roistacher, 1974) is a valid and reliable index of peer relations for elementary school children (Asher & Hymel., 1981).

Students are instructed to circle a number for each same sex classmate that describes how much they like that classmate from a rating of one denoting not at all to a rating of four denoting very much. This type of measure allowed for the evaluation of each member of the group by all other same sex members. Same sex ratings provide a more valid assessment of social acceptance in elementary school children then do cross sex ratings (Bukowski & Newcomb, 1984).

Peer nominations is a measure of social status (Coie, Dodge, & Coppotelli, 1982) and is obtained by asking classmates to list their three best and three least friends. This listing was made a part of the peer ratings instrument. Social status through peer nomination was initially used to identify targeted students and later used to measure intervention effects.

A strategy test was developed by the researchers to assess the extent to which the interpersonal strategies were mastered by the students in the experimental classroom by the end of the intervention period. Eight questions were asked of all students in the experimental classroom. Inquiries ranged from being asked to state the steps and meaning of the mnemonic devices to being asked how interested each student was in becoming a social skills trainer.

A teacher interview was conducted at the end of the intervention. The teacher of the experimental class was asked for any comments about the effectiveness of the intervention, opinions about improvement of the intervention, and whether she would recommend the intervention to other teachers.

Results

SSRST

The Social Skills Rating Scale for Teachers was obtained for the targeted students with learning disabilities at pre and post intervention. Table 4 presents the total scores obtained for these students. No discernible differences between groups were found, however all students increased in their teacher ratings or remained the same across data points.

Table 4 Total Scores of Teacher Ratings of Social Skills

	PRE	POST	CHANGE
Experimental			
Student 1	40	45	+5
Student 2	31	42	+11
Student 3	29	41	+13
Control			
Student 1	41	46	+5
Student 2	32	45	+13
Student 3	37	37	0

Strategy Test

The Strategy Test was given to all of the experimental classroom students at post intervention to assess their knowledge of the FAST and SLAM strategies and to examine the students' interest in becoming a social skills trainer. Frequency counts of students' correct responses were taken and converted into percents representing responses correct divided by total responses given. Results of the strategy test are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 Percentages of Correct Responses on the Strategy Test by the Experimental Class

Item		Correct Response
1)	Write the words for "FAST".	50%
2)	When would you use the FAST Strategy?	42%
3)	Write the steps for the FAST Strategy.	46%
4)	What do we mean by:	
	a) long run solutions?	67%
	b) short run solutions?	69%
5)	Write the words for "SLAM".	73%
6)	When would you use the SLAM Strategy?	30%
7)	Write the steps for the SLAM Strategy.	26%
8)	How interested are you in becoming a social skills trainer? If you were a social skills trainer this time, would you be interested to learn more skills and strategies?	
	Very interested	76%
	Somewhat interested	24%
	Not interested	0%

Peer Ratings

Peer ratings of friendship were taken at pre and post intervention. Table 6 presents the means of the peer ratings for the experimental and control students with learning disabilities. The experimental students increased or maintained their peer ratings from pre to post test whereas two of the control students decreased in peer ratings.

Table 6 Means of Peer Ratings of Friendship

Means of Peer Ratings of Friendship*

	PRETEST	POSTTEST	DIRECTION
Experimental LD			
Student 1	2.63	2.63	equal
Student 2	2.43	2.75	increase
Student 3	2.12	2.38	increase
Control LD			
Student 1	2.75	2.43	decrease
Student 2	2.29	2.71	increase
Student 3	2.08	2.00	decrease

* N = 26 students doing ratings in each classroom

The peer rating scale ranged from one, "not at all", to four, "very much" describing how much classmates would like to be friends with a particular classmate. Table 7 presents frequency counts of the number of times targeted students with learning disabilities received "not at all" and "very much" ratings by their classmates at pre and post intervention by experimental and control groups. Frequencies of "very much" peer ratings appear unchanged between pre and post intervention data points. However, "not at all" ratings appear to have decreased for each of the three targeted students with learning disabilities in the experimental class while ratings appeared to remain constant or increase for the targeted students in the control classroom.

Peer Nominations

Frequency counts of positive and negative nominations were taken at pre and post interventions for experimental and control targeted students with learning disabilities. Table 8 presents frequencies of positive and negative nominations of these students. Frequencies of positive nominations appear unchanged for either experimental or control groups at post intervention. However, there appears a marked decrease of negative nominations for two of the three targeted students in the experimental group, while marked increases occurred for the targeted students in the control group.

Table 7 Frequencies of Peer Ratings at Pre and Post Intervention

Frequency of "Not At All" Ratings

	PRE	POST
Experimental		
Subject 1	1	0
Subject 2	4	2
Subject 3	6	5
Control		
Subject 4	2	2
Subject 5	5	5
Subject 6	1	3

Frequency of "Very Much" Ratings

	PRE	POST
Experimental		
Subject 1	2	2
Subject 2	2	3
Subject 3	3	2
Control		
Subject 4	0	1
Subject 5	2	2
Subject 6	3	3

Table 8 Frequencies of Positive and Negative Nominations at Pre and Post Intervention

	Frequency of Positive Nominations	
	PRE	POST
Experimental		
Subject 1	2	2
Subject 2	2	0
Subject 3	3	1
Control		
Subject 4	0	0
Subject 5	1	2
Subject 6	0	1

	Frequency of Negative Nominations	
	PRE	POST
Experimental		
Subject 1	3	1
Subject 2	6	2
Subject 3	5	7
Control		
Subject 4	2	6
Subject 5	3	5
Subject 6	2	5

Social Cognitive Interview

The Social Cognitive Interview was given to all of the targeted students in both experimental and control groups at pre and post intervention. The interview consisted of seven situations. Student responses to the situations were rated by a researcher blind to

group classification as to their friendliness/assertiveness on a one to five scale. The means were calculated for each student on all seven situations, then students were compared. Results of the Social Cognitive Interview are reported in Table 9. There appears no differences due to intervention between experimental and control targeted students. In each group the students with learning disabilities increased in ratings from pre to post intervention whereas the NLD groups decreased in ratings. However, differences between all groups appear small.

Table 9 Means of Targeted Students' Social Cognitive Interview

	LD	NLD
Experimental		
PRE	3.52	4.33
POST	3.81	3.90
Control		
PRE	3.52	3.43
POST	3.71	3.48

Teacher Interview

A meeting was held after the conclusion of the intervention with the teacher in the experimental classroom. At that meeting the teacher was asked to comment and evaluate the intervention program and to comment on the effectiveness of the program, recommend any changes, and state whether she would recommend this program to other teachers. Her comments were recorded and transcribed. Overall, the teacher expressed that the intervention was tremendously successful. She stated that the intervention had made a significant improvement in the behavior of the students in her class, particularly the targeted students. Her one suggestion was that the intervention needed more time, both in length and in number of times per week. Below is part of that commentary.

> "Students need time and initial guidance in solving their own problems. They also need to be empowered to solve their own problems and given methods in which to do this. Both parents and teachers these days do not give children the time or the guidance to solve problems. The parents and teachers just quickly solve the problem and go on to the next one. Children need these skills in this fast-paced world....The families are so busy now, the communication with children is reduced. Students need to learn those skills necessary to help them throughout their lifetimes.
>
> "The problem solving sessions were wonderful. The materials were great. They were fun and the students loved them. They spent a lot of time looking out the window looking for the graduate student. One day I told them the wrong time and they actually got angry with me when she didn't show up. The kids really had fun. And yet things were organized and goals and objectives were apparent, even to the students.
>
> "The program has made a difference in my class, especially with self-concept. Before the students were always calling on me to tell someone to be good or to be quiet or something. Now they're doing a lot more management control. I have noticed that when the social skills sessions first started, one of the alternatives that was always popping up was 'tell the teacher'. Now particularly in the last sessions, that response was rarely given as an alternative, and never chosen as a long term solution.

> "I would definitely recommend this program. This program allows child direction and away from teacher direction. If done again the program should contain more sessions of shorter length, daily for 15-20 minutes. The program should also run all year long.
>
> "I would make no program changes. The time spent in this program was tremendously valuable. Teachers are frustrated because they do not have the time to develop this kind of program, and they don't know how to. They are not trained. This program is easily learned and easily implemented. It's also probably good in alleviating student stress."

Targeted students also made comments in the form of unsolicited letters to the graduate students after the intervention. Julio, the student who was described as a bully with an impulsive problem solving style at the beginning of the intervention wrote,

> "I had to take tests to be a social skills trainer. I don't know that I was a social skills trainer until they told me. I was very happy. I am glad that I am a social skills trainer. I want to be a social skills trainer for the rest of my life. Too bad I can't, I got my diploma already."

Another student wrote,

> "Thank you so much for everything. I learned a lot, and had so much fun. I liked the trinkets and gifts."

Discussion

This study sought to increase the peer acceptance of students with learning disabilities through the use of an intervention incorporating components found to be effective in other social intervention research. Traditional measures to assess change due to the intervention included teacher ratings of social skills and peer ratings and

nominations of peer acceptance. Additional measures assessed intervention effectiveness through student and teacher interviews. A test only control group was used to compare intervention effects.

When the semester long intervention was over and the data was collected and analyzed, few marked gains or differences between the experimental and test only controls appeared. We had felt throughout the intervention that gains in social skills and behaviors were occurring and that the intervention had made a difference in the social world of our three low peer accepted students with learning disabilities in the experimental regular education classroom. Why weren't the changes apparent in the measures given pre and post intervention? Why didn't the standardized measures show significant differences? Why didn't the peer ratings of friendship show tremendous leaps? Had we failed to increase the peer acceptance of these hard working, energetic students who had plowed through the intervention, who had said how much fun it was to be a social skills trainer.

While the results of the peer ratings and nominations and teacher ratings of social skills is not overwhelmingly positive, there are indications that the intervention proved successful. The frequency of peers rating targeted students as not being liked at all decreased for each of the three experimental subjects with learning disabilities, while remaining constant for the control subjects.

Far more striking were the comments by the teacher and students, and through parental support. The teacher interview was extremely positive. The teacher of the experimental classroom stated positive changes not only for the targeted students but for

the class as a whole. One hundred percent of the students in the experimental classroom stated that they were interested in becoming a social skills trainer. An example of parental support of the intervention occurred when parental permission was solicited to use slides of students involved in the intervention for presentations to educators. Every parent of a student in the experimental class assented after the first contact.

Increasing social skills and peer acceptance is not accomplished easily. However, components of effective interventions have been identified and warrant further investigation. Perhaps a longer intervention period would have elicited more identifiable and quantitative results. Research needs to continue to more closely examine and determine those best practices for increasing peer acceptance and social skills of learning disabled youth.

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